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ABSTRACT

In acquiring materials to build library collections, two functions have to be performed: selection and acquisition. Because the selection of books for inclusion in a library collection requires an intimate understanding of the purpose of the libary, a detailed knowledge of the subject area in question, time to read and make judgements about the value of any particular volume, and finally, the authority to develop the collections, librarians in university libraries are in trouble today. A brief look at the evolution of this problem of who should select and acquire books for the library collection is presented with numerous quotes from authorities in the field starting with Richard DeBury in the 13th century. It must be decided whether the range of duties required of a subject specialist/selector can effectively be done separately by various people or whether this job requires extremely competent people with broad, non-library preparation. (NH)

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BOOK SELECTION AND THE SUBJECT SPECIALIST IN THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

by

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Because the selection of books for inclusion in a library collection requires an intimate understanding of the purpose of the library, a detailed knowledge of the subject area in question, time to read and make judgments about the value of any particular volume, and finally the authority to develop the collections, librarians in university libraries are in trouble today. In past years these factors so important to the development of collections were much less complicated and the building of libraries proceeded apace, with more attention given to the problems of arrangement of materials, indexing through the public catalog, and the development of patron-oriented reference works and services. Perhaps the complexity of the problem of book selection, the realization that analysis of it was like attempting the analysis of a can of worms has been just what persuaded eager library theoreticians to seek the less wiggly areas.

The importance of book selection has, of course, been recognized as primary in the development of libraries. Richard De Bury in the 13th century explains that he was careful to seek out only the best in literature. And in a later age, with perhaps more levity, Jared Bean (or Edmund Lester Pearson?) remarks

> The Librarian may be justly compar'd with him who keeps an Armoury of Weapons; for as the Keeper doth neither forge the implements of War, nor employ them on the field of Battle, so neither doth the Librarian compse the learn'd Works which are under his charge, nor use their wisdom in his own especial interest.
>
> But like that other Keeper, it is his Duty to see that his Armoury (which is the Library) be well stock'd with the fittest Weapons...

And in another place:

> You shall chuse your Books with Care and Circumspection. When you have determin'd that it is prudent to purchase a certain Work do so cautiously and make a Shrewd Bargain with the Vendor. It will then be your Duty to Peruse the Volume, even if (as doubtless will be the Fact) you have scan'd it before Buying.
>
> Do not let the Importunities of Persons who come to the Library hasten you in the performance of this Task. They should be Content to wait for the Book until you have Satisfied yourself of its contents.

But then, typically, even Master Bean proceeds to the problem of accessioning and cataloging. We see in his discussion, though, and indeed throughout the whole of library literature, the assumption that it is the librarian who is responsible for the collection. In earlier years, in what seems to have been (and I think probably was) a less frantic time, librarians were expected to read, indeed it was part of the caricature, and the implication was the broad pursuit of knowledge, presumably to be better able to select and recommend books. In colleges a member of the faculty was chosen to be the librarian, and the implication is again easy to determine, that the development of this half of the educational system had to be in the hands of a person of erudition and scholarly dedication. In the days of the last century, with limited publication, smaller academic programs, and more time, the librarian still was able to keep up with available literature. But times changed.

Book production multiplied by tens of times, scholarship particularly in the sciences made giant leaps forward, population increased, production techniques freed man from total devotion to obtaining food and clothing, and education became at the same time more feasible, more necessary, and more

available. And the librarian's office changed from a quiet, studious sanctuary to Grand Central Station. The trend in librarianship was to figure out solutions to the technical problems, such as cataloging, and to relegate the choosing of the books, perhaps by default, to the faculty. On the one side this trend was supported as the only - and indeed, the desirable solution; for example, Randall and Goodrich:

> The library. . .is relatively helpless. . .unless there be a conscious effort on the part of the teachers to assit it. This effort. . .must begin with careful book selection. . . . Every member of the teaching staff is, in a real sense, a member of the library staff and is responsible with it for the collection of the proper books and for their distribution.[2]

To be sure they do not leave the part of the librarian out of the picture, and add concerning his need for erudition:

> There is no sadder spectacle than a scholar trying to explain himself and his needs to a man with no understanding of scholarship, unless it be the latter trying to comprehend the former.[3]

This ambivalence has continued in library thinking for some time. In the early edition of their work, Wilson and Tauber had the following statement:

> Book orders, originating with the faculty, usually bear the approval of faculty library representatives or the administrative heads of instructional departments. In those few universities in which funds are ample to cover practically every request, orders may go direct to the librarian from the faculty member.[4]

But further on in commenting on acquisition policies, they say:

> In the third place -- and more important -- the validity of the assumption upon which the division of responsibility between the library staff and faculty for the selection of general and special material rests may well be examined. This assumption is that the faculty is more competent than the library staff to select materials for the support of instruction and research. Granting that faculty members are more familiar with subject fields than are library staff members, it does not follow that the faculty can or will devote sufficient time to this activity to insure the systematic building-up of a collection that will be adequate to meet the demands made upon it.[5]

Two comments may be made, it seems to me, first that the edition of 11 years later does not modify these remarks, nor, second, is there any suggestion that the situation could be improved by the employment of a different type of librarian.

Be that as it may, it is true that university libraries have relegated to the faculty the responsibility of initiating a major portion of the decisions to purchase, and have kept for themselves the responsibilities of seeing to it that general reference materials are purchased and that the collections on the whole stay fairly well rounded. The procedures by which this symbiotic relationship is kept in some semblance of equilibrium vary a bit, but not so much that Fussler was not able to describe the typical arrangement quite well:

> The tradition of book selection in most university libraries may be described somewhat as follows. By some device or other, the bulk of the available book fund for the year was broken down into departmental allocations, the size of which varied according to various ingenious formulae or weighted factors such as the extent of existing library resources, the

amount of publishing being done in the field, the cost of publications in a particular field, numbers of graduate and undergraduate students, number of faculty members, and the amount allotted last year, to name a few of the more common factors. The librarian kept a reserve to be used to cover general acquisitions and to help with major departmental purchases. Each department then appointed a library advisor who either ordered materials on his own initiative or on the recommendation of his departmental colleagues.[6]

And this is the arrangement with which most university libraries are saddled today. To speak of "an acquisition policy," then, with this many people involved, is to refer to the impossible, though we continue to do so. Keyes Metcalf in an article almost 20 years ago said:

Problems of acquisition policy are in many ways the most important confronting administrators of university libraries. This, unfortunately, does not mean that these problems have never been dodged; many of the difficulties now besetting great research libraries. . .result from failures to face such problems squarely.[7]

He then proceeds to dodge them for Harvard for 10 pages.

All the while, of course, we have had many essays on book selection and the book selector. Analyses of the job of book selection are numerous and various - in quality at least. Most analyse in various ways the bases on which selection decision are made, such as the reputation of the author, the importance of the subject to the library, the edition, the bias of the author, the library's holdings, and so forth. Implicit in this analysis is the requirement that some person can be found competent to make the judgments, and thus, perhaps, the relegation of the duty to the faculty is the one best hope - but admittedly not perfect.

No one to my knowledge has gone so far in discussing the "Personal qualifications of the selector" as Francis Drury, and while the language used to express the ideas may be quaint, I think it bears reading:

> In addition to learning the theories and fundamentals of book selection through study and experience, the competent selector must make certain things a sure and definite part of his equipment. First of all, he should understand human nature and appreciate why people read. Then he should know the community or the constituency which the library serves. He should know the uses to be made of books.[8]

> Experience in a library is, however very necessary for the selector. It ripens and mellows judgment. Judgment without experience produces a theorist; experience without judgment, a hide-bound conservative. Likewise, experience consummates education and training. Education without experience produces a pedant; experience without education, a Philistine. Library experience is gained through actual service, perhaps in the reference or circulation departments. Here come the contacts with readers which show what is expected of the library; here are developed the keen consciousness and feeling for the public which are essential in satisfying demand; here is demonstrated the worth of a book by the use which is made of it; here are evolved the perspective which visions the value of a particular book to an individual reader, the attitude which recognizes the wishes of others, though contrary to one's own, and the catholicity of taste which subordinates one's own likes and dislikes.[9]

It might be suggested that hidden in the midst of this verbiage are references to the very qualities, attitudes, and experience which make a conglomeration of faculty such poor selectors. But it is easy to see why

they must be. Their time is occupied primarily with the classroom or with their personal research. Neither of these is condusive to study of antiquarian catalogs, new and forthcoming book lists, or selective bibliographies of subject areas. At best the faculty member may find, in preparation for a particular class, that the collection in that small area is weak and may be prompted to say so to a librarian; or in pursuing research for an article, he may be made aware of a desirable journal that should be subscribed to, and may forward to the library a request for it. It is unfortunately true that even if all faculty members were moderately active in strengthening the library in the areas in which they taught and researched, there would still be large gaps left in the collection, and this for a general university library is unfortunate.

It seems then that what is needed is a person with subject knowledge, bibliographic knowledge, an acquaintance with the particular library collection, and with the academic program of the university, that is, the scholar librarian of by-gone years. And such a realization has come to many of the larger university libraries in recent years. Robert Haro reported in 1967 that of 62 research libraries heard from in his recent survey, a major number utilized librarians in some way to plug this hole:

> Of the libraries with over 500,000 volume collections, approximately 69% utilized bibliographers or subject specialists who were located in the technical services or were directly responsible either to the director of libraries or one of the assistant directors; 22% of the remaining libraries within this size-class utilized the heads of divisional reading rooms or subject areas as selectors. Only 6% of these libraries used subject specialists in reference departments as selectors.[10]

If the question of the academic preparation of these people and their major duty of selection has not been a great matter for discussion, the question of the department in which they serve has, and I believe the lack of understanding of the essential function of the acquisitions department is at the heart of the matter. In the acquiring of materials to build library collections, two functions have to be performed; selection and acquisition. That is, through knowledge of the collection, the subject area, and the patrons' requirements, it is determined that such and such materials should be procured and added to the collection. Then the acquisition step comes in, with its expertise in the matters of bibliographic description, the book trade, the mysteries of the book funds and accounting, etc. Now, as long as faculty are doing the selecting, the acquisition department does its acquiring in the best spirit. But as soon as it is determined that the library staff should assume major responsibility for selection, then the acquisition department claims that it is their province and that selectors or subject specialists can function properly only if in that department.

Obviously this is not so, and in fact, it is probable that they should be in a public service department in order to maintain better a connection with the public and thus an understanding of their needs. Everett T. Moore discussed the responsibilities of reference librarians in academic libraries:

> Reference librarians are, therefore, increasingly engaged in a variety of specialized functions and responsibilities. With these responsibilities must necessarily go greater responsibility for collection building and selection of materials in specialized fields. Whatever organization of services in academis and research libraries brings these activities more fully into the area of reference work is likely to be a healthy one, for

it combines the reference librarians' active functions of interpreting the libraries' services and collections with responsibilities for developing and extending its resources.[11] (But, of course, Mr. Moore is a reference librarian.)

Dr. Cecil K. Byrd in his article cited as reading material below has done a very good job of explaining how the University of Indiana dealt with the problem. Mr. Robert Haro, in a very recent article, which is also cited below for reading, has done a more general discussion of this particular problem and his paper was reacted to by Mrs. Helen Welsh Tuttle, a member of this summer's faculty.

It is contended by some, as by Mrs. Tuttle, that the range of duties required of a subject specialist/selector is too great, and I think that it must be decided whether these duties can effectively be done separately by various people or have we, after years of analyzing library functions, finally found one job that requires extremely competent people with broad, non-library preparation.

FOOTNOTES:

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2. Randall, William M. and Goodrich, Francis L. D. Principles of college library administration. Chicago, U. of Chicago Press, 1936. p. 2.

3. Ibid. p. 8.

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5. Ibid. p. 306-7.

6. Fussler, Herman H. "Bibliographer working in a broad area of knowledge." College and Research Libraries 10:200. July '49.

7. Metcalf, Keyes D. "Problems of acquisition policy in a university library." Harvard Library Bulletin IV:283. (1950)

8. Drury, Francis K. W. Book selection. Chicago, American Library Assn., 1930. p. 337.

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10. Haro, Robert P. "Book selection in academic libraries." College and Research Libraries 28:104-6. Mar. '67.

11. Moore, Everett T., "Reference service in academis and research libraries." Library Trends 12:368. Jan. '64.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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Robert P. Haro, "The bibliographer in the academic library." Library Resources and Technical Services 13:163-169. (Spring 1969)

Helen Welch Tuttle, "An acquisitionist looks at Mr. Haro's bibliographer." Library Resources and Technical Services 13:170-174. (Spring 1969)